

Don't Divulge the Whole at Once

by Evan Lorentz

The humans detected the crash in the highlands of their second planet almost immediately and came quickly, as the Shi knew they would. They recovered the ship and its dying pilot, again as the Shi knew they would. They did not find the second pilot lurking inside. This too the Shi knew.

So now, weeks later, the Tilak quarrel sat idle in the largest, most secure laboratory aboard the human space station. Idle, but not empty.

Well hidden, the second presence watched.

Carene Goff approached the laboratory door. The sterile hallway she passed through was dimly lit, the facility in low power mode at so late an hour. To some people, the sharp clicking of her heels on the white tile would seem unusually loud, as if rising to fill the space the light has abandoned. Carene was too professional to entertain such a foolish notion.

She brushed back her reddish-brown hair as she saw her reflection in the heavy, shielded door. *Nose too long, eyes too blue*, she thought, but she said that to her mirror every day. There was a soft buzz as the ID scanner sampled her DNA, then the door swung wide to admit here. "Good evening, Dr. Firante," came the disembodied voice of Maresa, the lab's mainframe computer.

To Maresa and the rest of the staff, she was Dr. Kara Firante. To her CISyn handler, she was "Phantasm". Only to her parents, whom she'd not seen or spoken to since she was first accepted for deep cover training in St. Petersburg, was she Carene Goff. She was past the point where any of those labels held any more meaning than the rest.

To Carene's surprise, the lights in the Engineering Analysis lab were already on as she entered. She'd been here in the dead of night countless times before, far more often than the security log indicated, thanks to her skillful alterations. Never had she encountered anyone else there.

But there, inexplicably, was Taylor Harkins. The awkward young scientist was far more shocked than she, however, jerking back in his chair and knocking an input terminal off the desk at the sound of the lab door. He was tall and fit, but too lanky for Carene's tastes and far too meek. He said, "Gracious!" and then spun his chair to face Carene. "Oh sorry, Dr. Firante."

As annoyed as she was to find someone already in the lab and more so that it was this pest, not a trace of it found its way into her voice. "I didn't mean to startle you," she smiled.

Harkins came to his feet, trying to smooth out the wrinkles in his shirt while ignoring his tousled hair, which was even more unruly than usual. "You can't sleep tonight either?"

"Not really. I thought I'd come down and check on the results of an experiment I set up earlier today." Carene deliberately paused a moment, and then gave a practiced laugh as she pointed to the clock on the wall. "I set up yesterday, I mean."

"Oh no!" said Harkins, seeing the time. "I had no idea how late it was!"

Perfect, though Carene.

"The hours just fly by when you're trying to figure this thing out, don't they?" said Harkins, conversationally.

Not perfect, she corrected. The over-eager researcher was not too tired to indulge in aimless prattle. So she, like him, turned to marvel at the "thing" in question.

Large though the lab was, the captured Shi spacecraft nearly filled it. Desks, computers, all equipment was shoved against the walls to make room for the strange, amorphous fighter. The energy emissions from the ship were so low they were barely detectable even by XeLabs' most advanced equipment, yet somehow it still hovered several centimetres off the ground, reflecting the sleek black floor on its sleeker silver hull. The shape of it seemed to be changing almost imperceptibly, though computer observations and time-lapse photography had determined this to be some sort of unsettling optical illusion.

Dr. Harkins shook his head sadly. "I thought we'd know so much by now, but it seems like we're no closer to understanding it than when they first brought it in from Ishtar Terra."

"You expected to find the operator's manual?" Carene chided. It came out so much more sweetly than she meant it.

"Who knows if the Shi even have a written language?" countered Harkins, sighing. "I'm beginning to wonder if you have to be telepathic to interface with it at all."

"If the bio-med team made better progress with the pilot than we have the ship, we might have the answer to that. They still can't even tell if that Shi is living or not. We're not much better. Seven weeks of work and all we've learned about the ship is how to open the hatch."

"It's just crazy to me that we don't have more people in here," said Harkins. "We should have a hundred scientists working around the clock to pick it apart."

"You know that secrecy is more important than speed," Carene reminded him. And that was where she came in.

This monumental find was not public knowledge. Even the Central Governance Corporation didn't know about it. The fighter crashed on Venus, right in XeLabs' own backyard, and they were able to salvage it with no one being the wiser.

No one but CISyn, of course. No one could keep a secret long from the Coordination and Intelligence Syndicate. CISyn's official job was technical planning and combat coordination. Espionage was its unofficial job.

The administration at XeLabs had a history of hiding research projects from the government. They had to, for their own corporate survival. Despite the fact the XeLabs was better equipped to conduct scientific analyses, the CGC often assigned their own people to key projects. With their vast advantage in resources, the CGC often brought products to market faster than XeLabs. Corporate espionage - it had a proud history reaching back through the centuries to before the government incorporated.

CISyn, on the other hand, was in the business of knowledge. That made all of this *their* business. The Gongen and the Mavericks were the greater enemy, but CISyn still maintained covert operatives within all the Earther corporations, including XeLabs, iCom and FedGrav.

Carene was astonished at the audacity of XeLabs when the Shi spacecraft was brought in. The pilot's biology would provide enough secrets to keep the company both busy and rich. In fact, the bio-techs said that its body had nanites, tiny microscopic machines that were trying to heal him. Nanotechnology was only hopeful theory to Earther scientists, but the Shi seemed to be far more advanced.

XeLabs decided not to share any of the find, so they kept the ship too. Just how a handful of scientists were expected to unlock any technology from an alien spacecraft was as much a mystery as the ship itself. The CGC would surely find out about XeLabs' newest dirty secret long before the researchers had pried a shred of useful knowledge from the ship.

Carene was out of her element as well. One did not pose as a scientist without possessing a strong background in the subject. Sure, she was also trained in computer hacking and covert communications, but her skills weren't enough to tackle this engineering challenge.

Still, her handler's instructions were explicit. *PHANTASM: Take no overt action. Maintain cover. Relay any scans that can be duplicated without risking discovery. We'll put remote teams on it. OUT.* This was a sensible course of action. Sending a strike team in to capture the Shi fighter would only tip off XeLabs to search their

organization for moles. For the moment at least, CISyn analysts would have plenty to work on just from the scans Carene transmitted.

“Dr. Firante?” Harkins’ voice snapped Carene back to the moment.

She turned to him. “Please. Call me Kara.”

Any poise the young man had gathered since his clumsiness at the desk abandoned him at once. “Uh. Huh, well...” He laughed a nervous giggle.

Shi smiled at him. She even batted her eyelashes; she couldn’t lay it on too thick with this man.

He looked away, rubbing his eyes with his palms. “Boy, I really should get to bed.”

“It’ll still be here in the morning,” Carene assured him.

For several seconds, they were still as statues. Realizing Harkins would never be the first to move, Carene broke away, headed to one of the tables along the wall, and made a show of setting up some test of some sort.

Finally –finally! – Harkins went for the door. It slid open as he drew near, but he stopped at the threshold. “Goodnight... Kara,” he called after her.

Carene’s blue eyes rolled. Feigning great interest in her work, she did not look back. Then the door closed behind Harkins, and she was alone with the Shi fighter.

She reached with one hand for an input terminal to access Maresa’s records, digging in her pocket with the other for her placer. Once the small round device was affixed to the pad, she activated them both and requested access to all data collected in the lab over the last seventy-two hours.

Carene worked her shift in the lab diligently every day. Her real work, these late night intrusions in to the lab records, was less regular. Always at a different hour. Every second, third, or even fourth day. Never on two evenings back to back, and so she was used to waiting a minute or two for her searches to collate. She passed the time as she usually did, gazing at the ship.

As irritating as Harkins could be, Carene had to admit it was hard not to share his awe and enthusiasm over this strange wonder. At this time just last year, contact with aliens was still the stuff of fiction. Now here she stood in front of an extraterrestrial ship.

The semantics of it were somewhat amusing to Carene. Technically, she supposed, the Shi shouldn’t be called extraterrestrials. Since their home planet had appeared entirely in our Solar System, they were no more from another place than those living on Ganymede, Venus, or anywhere else within the Sun’s influence.

Looking at this fighter, though, no one could claim they weren't alien. It was like a blob of liquid metal stretched out of shape by some magnetic force and frozen in place. It reminded Carene of those ancient recordings of early space explorers playing with water in weightlessness in the days before artificial gravity. It was hard to even imagine the ships in flight, though Carene had seen holos of that, both in space and in atmosphere, where the laws of aerodynamics should have applied in more detrimental ways.

Within days of it being brought in, it showed no evidence of ever having been in a crash. Impossibly durable, the ship had sustained little visible damage despite being half submerged at the end of a long impact trench. Even while they were digging the thing up and disguising the scar in the landscape, they detected that the ship was incredibly somehow repairing itself. The theory was that it used some variation of the biological nanotechnology at work in the bodies of the Shi themselves. Soon after arriving at the orbital facility, the repairs seemed complete. The ship retreated into the apparent standby mode in which it had remained unreachable for the last forty days.

"Records retrieved," Maresa informed. Carene tore her gaze away from the ship and set about scanning through the data on the terminal. She would send it all to her handler, of course. She couldn't tell which bit of information might be crucial. That was for skilled analysts at CISyn to decide, not the agent collecting it. Still, she often liked to sift through things and earmark sections she thought might be worthy of immediate attention.

There was a radiological decay test, showing the same results as the last six, of course. A new test on breaking apart the molecular bonds in a small sample taken from the aft hull. Perhaps there was something there. Carene tapped the entry to flag it, and then tapped the bottom of the screen to continue paging through the information.

Her survey was almost finished when an item at the end drew her attention. It seemed to be a routine request for a toxicological analysis, except that according to the entry, the amount of data downloaded was impossibly high. "Display," she told the terminal, tapping the offending record.

Someone had run a test of the biological construction theory by attempting to poison a specimen from the ship using a variety of toxins. From common to exotic, it was an impressive list. Had she been on an assignment of a different nature, Carene might have drawn from that. But it only amounted to a few screens' worth of information. She rechecked the "Data Transferred" figure. It didn't add up at all. There should be 200 times more information in this entry than what was displayed.

Not many people would have noticed such a discrepancy. Most of those would probably have ascribed it to some computer error, and would either have ignored it or gone off to troubleshoot the comm. Subsystems. But Carene, practiced in

piggybacking information onto other innocuous items, suspected something else. Someone else.

After hijacking a data stream in such a manner, a good hacker would go back and alter the record itself to eliminate the evidence. Carene was going to do this in just a few minutes to remove any trace of tonight's espionage. If that was really what was happening in this record, someone had been sloppy. She scrolled back to the top of the record, and froze at what she saw:

Toxicological Analyses on Sample 96-B. Requested: Taylor Harkins.

According to the time stamp, this download had been terminated less than ten minutes ago.

She looked up, half expecting to see the young doctor there pointing a pistol at her. But he wasn't, and immediately Carene berated herself. The notion of Taylor Harkins as a spy was preposterous. She knew enough about acting a role to have seen through the performance of a character like his, had it truly been a performance. His awkwardness, his exuberance, could not be a put-on. It was far too high profile to make an effective alias, anyway. Somebody else had to be riding along on Harkins' data stream.

But who could that be? There was no one else in the lab right now...

A cold chill came across her. The terminal fell to the floor forgotten as Carene backed against the experiment table, as close to the wall as she could get. She glanced beneath the table, but saw no one was there. "Maresa, identify everyone in the lab."

"Dr. Kara Firante," came the cheerful voice of the computer. Too cheerful for the circumstances.

Carene supposed that a hacker could fool the computer into thinking he wasn't there, but she herself had never bothered with such an elaborate precaution during her time at XeLabs. Besides, from the sloppy clean up, it had appeared that the hacker had been caught in the act. Would there have been time to spoof the lab sensors? Surely not, since the security was far tighter on them than on the records archives.

Still, Carene didn't yet allow the possibility she was imagining all of this. Nor did she assume she was alone just because the computer said she was. She completed a thorough search of the lab before finding herself back at the terminal she'd dropped on the ground. Collecting herself, but not relaxing, she picked it up.

The information on the screen had changed. The high data transfer size from just moments ago was gone. A smaller, more reasonable number was now affixed to the entry.

The made no sense at all. Why wouldn't the anonymous intruder have left well enough alone? Granted, Carene had been suspicious, but perhaps after a while she would have dismissed the matter as a computer glitch and moved on. But now she *knew* something was wrong.

Unless maybe the hacker didn't know she was here? That didn't seem possible. If it were easy to access the lab's records remotely, Carene would be doing it herself. There was no reason to risk exposure by coming down there in person to steal computer data. She did so because the security measures protecting the lab data were first rate, as they should be for any project that merited being called "covert." Perhaps she could have plotted a way around them, given enough time, but the attempt would be risky.

No, the hacker had to be here, in the lab or near it. But Carene had just searched every inch of the room herself. She glanced around again, double-checking that there was no hiding spot she might have missed.

Then her eyes fell upon the Shi fighter. She realized then that someone must have been hiding inside.

She cast about the lab, looking for something with heft she might use as a weapon. Modern science was too sophisticated. On every table, in every cabinet, in every drawer, nothing but compact, portable devices intended to make work easier for the researchers. Nothing appropriate for defending one's life. She debated grabbing a small tool case, but testing it's inadequate weight in her hand, decided she'd be better off empty-handed should it come to a fight.

Carene worked her way around to the port side of the ship, where the entry hatch lay open. Her heart beat was loud in her ears. The bright lights of the lab somehow failed to reach far inside the ship. As she drew closer to the darkened entrance, she saw some faint light from the cockpit of the ship. She'd been aboard it several times before, and this light was not something she or any of the other scientists had witnessed.

She stepped through the hatch in a silent motion and turned left toward the cockpit.

There was no chair at the front of the ship. The Shi hovered eerily rather than stood, and no one knew what they did rather than sit. Instead, there was an unobstructed view of the ship's control console. There were constellations of illuminated readouts on a surface that had been dark since the moment humans first laid eyes on it. She saw no one.

Carene looked back over her shoulder, but there was no one to the aft of the ship either. There was nowhere that someone might hide. Nevertheless, she waited several moments for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, then looked about again. Still she saw no one, and so she crept forward to the console.

She didn't expect to make any sense of the streams of information projected before her, but to the amazement, most of what was displayed was in English. Getting over this shock, she faced another when she realized what the words said. It was highly-classified information about XeLabs, streaming by faster than she could read in detail. From the words and phrases she could catch, Carene knew this data was from deeper in Maresa's mainframe than she had ever dared to intrude.

Before Carene could decide what to do next, the text vanished and the console fell dark. Again she glanced around, and again she saw no one.

But she did see the entry hatch sliding closed without a sound.

Carene bounded across the space in three steps, but she was too slow. The door had already lowered to knee level. Thoughts of jumping and sliding out across the floor faded as it slid into place. If she'd expected the sound of a lock of latch, she heard none. She might have used her input terminal to open the hatch again, but she had left it on the table outside.

"Maresa?" she called out. Then she swore as she realized the hull of the ship was soundproof, and the XeLabs computer could not hear her.

Immediately, Carene began to fabricate her story. Morning would come in a few hours, and she would be found here, trapped inside the ship. Explaining her presence in the lab wouldn't be so difficult. As Harkins had proven earlier, it was not that odd for someone to work after hours; Carene erased the records of her coming only because her visits were so regular and could arouse suspicion.

Unless the Shi computer was still active when she was found, she certainly would not tell anyone about the XeLabs data access she'd seen. But should she tell them the ship had apparently shut her inside by itself, or craft some story of accidentally tripping the door? The latter seemed ridiculous. Would the former be giving too much away to the XeLabs staff? Probably not. Maresa's sensors record the event anyway, and Carene wouldn't have a chance to alter them. She just needed to calm down and collect herself. Deep breaths. Deep...

Carene found that she couldn't catch a decent breath. Her mouth flapped open, she rasped and wheezed, but took in no air.

Trying to fight panic with her years of training, she banged on the hatch of the ship. Uselessly. The seam of the door had completely vanished once it had shut, so she couldn't even be sure she hit the right place. Besides, the thing could withstand ship-to-ship weapons fire. It survived a crash landing on Venus.

Carene's strength was waning. The cabin was still dark, but from a few standby lights up front she was her vision blurring. Just one good breath was all she needed. Then she could worry about the one after that.

Staggering blindly toward the console, she dropped to her hands and knees. She no longer truly heard the horrible gasping noises she was making. She jabbed at the alien controls, hoping that by some accident she'd trigger a reversal of the atmospheric shit that someone had actuated. No response.

Somewhere in her mind, Carene Goff held out hope that one day she would see her parents again. She would hear them call her by her real name once more.

Her last thought was that this would never come to pass.

The human collapsed to the floor of the Tilak quarrel, dead. Irretrievably, the hidden pilot knew. There were no nanites in its body to resuscitate it.

A clever human. Not clever enough, but more capable than any of the others who poked and prodded it incessantly for so many days. It was to endure this intrusion, however. Those were its orders: To crash itself where the humans would find it, then be captured and brought back to one of their bases where it could access information to relay back to the Shi.

The living Shi pilot was to receive a mortal wound. That was required to complete the ruse; the humans would have suspected otherwise. It was not Crown class at any rate, so the loss was minimal to the Tilak.

The artificial intelligence, buried deep inside the quarrel's computer, one with the ship itself, transmitted a message to its Shi overseers. *A human researcher detected my access into their computer systems. My judgment was to eliminate the subject. The death should be ruled accidental, but the humans are given to curiosity. It may be my cover will remain intact for only a short while longer. Please advise.*

It then reintroduced oxygen into its cabin and opened its hatch before setting out to remove all evidence in the human computer of tonight's intrusion. Before that had finished, a response came.

"Continue as planned. If your position is compromised, we will come for you."

The Tilak quarrel was satisfied.